The Fourth Church Pulpit

LOVE CAME DOWN

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John M. Buchanan

We shall both experience dark hours. How hard it is to accept what defies our understanding. How great the temptation to feel ourselves at the mercy of blind chance ... And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can hardly stand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light ... Our eyes are at fault, that is all ... God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness. No evil can befall us, whatever men do to us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Maria von Wedemeyer
Love Letters from Cell 92
December 13, 1943

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Matthew 1:18-25

"... faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."
1 Corinthians 13:13 (NRSV)

This was the year I finally made it to Bethlehem. I had been going every year, in my imagination, just as you have. I have had in my mind's eye the "Little Town" which Phillips Brooks wrote about so beautifully in 1868:

> "O little town of Bethlehem,
> How still we see thee lie!
> Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
> The silent stars go by."

It's my favorite carol, actually, the one that transports me, in memory, back to childhood and family Christmas celebrations, and in imagination to a gentle, quiet village, the City of David, the House of Bread, where Mary and Joseph found no room in the inn and welcomed their new son in the stable and laid him in a manger.

Fortunately I had read a lot about modern Bethlehem. In fact, the *New York Times Magazine* this morning has a fine cover article, "*Allah in Bethlehem.*" "The Bethlehem tourists find nothing looks like the town the Son of God might want to be born in ... Everything here is meant to test your faith ... This, the most un-Christmas like spot in Christendom."

So I was prepared and I warned the 53 travelers at the end of a long, hot and tiring day, to lower their expectations because what we were about to see would not look like the precious nativity of memory and Christmas card art. Modern day Bethlehem is a suburb of Jerusalem. It is in what has been called the West Bank: that is, until 1967 it was part of Jordan. The people who live there are Palestinian; some Christian, mostly Muslim. To drive from Jerusalem to Bethlehem or to any part of the West Bank we had to pass through a military check point. Until last week the guards at the check point were Israeli soldiers. Just last week the Israelis pulled out and turned all security over to the Palestinians, which is all right with the Christians because they too are Palestinians, although many are now moving out, afraid of Muslim rule.

Bethlehem is rough around the edges. It is not a little town and it surely does not lie still, at least while we were there. Nativity tourism is the town's chief source of revenue. Manger Square is a big plaza, filled with tourist buses, automobiles and vendors: men and boys of all ages, very aggressively selling post cards, trinkets, Arab headdresses, Palestinian flags, beads, rosaries, mother of pearl replicas of the manger. There are two churches at Manger Square, a legacy of the Crusades actually. Arabic people have never quite forgotten that it was Rome that sponsored the Crusades and so when and where possible they have been more cooperative with Christian churches that didn't participate so enthusiastically in the invasion of their country and the slaughter of their people in the name of Jesus. So there are Orthodox churches: Greek and Russian and Armenian and Serbian. At Manger Square it is an Orthodox church standing over the grotto, and beside it a Roman Catholic Church.

Grotto? Hallmark has assured me it was a stable just like the one at Aunt Peg's farm ... How can we have cattle lowing if we don't have a stable? "Grotto" sounds like a Tunisian restaurant. All Luke says, of course, is that they laid him in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn; and Matthew merely says the Magi came to the house where they were.

The Church of the Nativity is very crowded, and ornate. Some might call it garish, with Christmas ornaments hanging from the ceiling and icons and candles and strings of Christmas lights covering every available space and filling every available corner. A long line twists around the nave leading to a narrow, one-person-at-a-time stairway down to a tiny space which indeed appears to be a kind of cave in the rock. It is late, near closing time, very crowded, very hot; people are becoming pushy and testy. American tourists from Chicago became almost nationalistic, pulling together to get our folks in before the Germans who are moving in from the left, dividing our ranks. At the Church of the Nativity it takes thirty or forty minutes, maybe an hour, to get from the hot, dusty square

outside to the hot, close and crowded entry to the grotto and finally, there I was — on the very spot where Jesus was born: the holiest spot in the world: a tiny room, maybe six feet by six feet with bare rock on one side and a many pointed, gilt, star inlaid in the floor where tradition says the birth took place. The woman in front of me was on her hands and knees kissing the spot; the man behind me was pushing and shoving. An officious gentleman in his shirt sleeves is standing in the middle of the room gesturing aggressively and barking: "There's the manger — there's the birth — there's the exit. Take a look, take a picture and go."

And up the steps we went "spiritually assaulted," we decided, some angry, all let down. We walked to the Roman Church and sat together in the pews and read Luke 2 and sang "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and "Silent Night." And then back through the vendors to the inevitable souvenir shop to help the local economy, and back to the bus as a vendor followed us onto the bus with his postcards. It was not easy to persuade him to leave.

I don't think I would go back, but it was a healthy reminder that Jesus was born into the real world, not the world created by the Christmas industry. And that maybe the heat and dust and crowds, the poverty and political tension, the soldiers, the ever present anxiety about the possibility of violence, even the religious competition, the pilgrims pushing ... Maybe all of that is not at all unlike the Bethlehem in which Jesus was actually born.

And so today, December 24, the end of Advent, the day of Christmas Eve, we come in some way, once again to Bethlehem. For some perhaps the experience will be something like what I experienced: "Here's the manger; here's the birth; here's the exit." But perhaps for some — for you perhaps — there will be a deeper sense that something soul shattering and life changing and world creating is what happened when the Child was born.

In his *Christmas Oratorio*, "For The Time Being," W. H. Auden has the shepherds say, after the angels have sung their glorias:

> "Let us run to learn
> How to love and run
> Let us run to love."

And the chorus responds:

> "All, all, all of them
> Run to Bethlehem ..."

"Let us run to learn how to love." It's not really a tourist stop, not for us. It's a place we learn about love.

Harvard Theologian Diana Eck in her book, *Encountering God*, argues that love is the essence of the Christian life. Love is what people do when they know about God's gift of Jesus Christ. Christian faith, she says, has more to do with love than theology.

> "The language of faith is the language of affection, ... Faith language is analogous to the language we use when we say to someone, 'I love you, you're the only one in the world for me.' It does not mean 'I have systematically surveyed everyone in the world and I have chosen you.'"

The great Christian affirmations of faith — the Creeds — begin, in the original Latin, with the word "Credo," which we translate, "I believe." What credo really means in Latin is "I give my heart to," not — I have thought about this and conclude that these theological propositions are intellectually true.

Faith, Eck argues, is not about propositions, but about love and commitment. [p. 95]

Religion, she says, takes the love of the Gospel and turns it upside down. "How is it that the vibrance of love language and heart language become starched and stiffened over time into the language of dogma?" (Which sounds a lot like what is happening in our Presbyterian family these days.)

The uniqueness of Christianity is that it takes an idea, more or less shared by all religions — the holiness of God and redefines it as the holy love of God.

What makes us Christian, what is uniquely Christian, is the idea that in Jesus Christ, God is revealed as love and the life of faith is not a struggle to achieve purity or holiness but is a commitment to live out that same love in daily life. Eck is right. Too often the churches have taught that Christian life is essentially either a matter of believing the right doctrines or achieving a degree of moral purity. But that misses the entire point.

Jesus Christ was born in a real Bethlehem. Love exists in and for the real world and real people or it doesn't exist at all.

There is amazing agreement between religion and the social sciences that love, or something very much like it, lies at the heart of both the human dilemma and human promise.

Put as simply as possible, we need love in order to live. We all know now that babies don't do very well physically if they are not touched and stroked and patted and sung to and talked to. It was Erik Erikson who said that a "foundational element of infant development is experiencing the gaze of a delighted other."

Think about how utterly true that is. Think about neglected and abandoned children and their prospects. Think about the curse of child abuse and its almost demonic propensity for repeating itself in the next generation, so that abused children become abusing parents. Think about what it means in the under-culture of poverty, where infants, toddlers, children who do not experience the gaze of a delighted other ever, become angry adolescents with easy access to drugs and guns.

Psychiatrist Gerald May was asked to speak to a conference on psychiatry and the Christian faith recently on the topic of love. He entitled his talk, "Ten Things I Think I Know About Love" because if he had to talk about what he knew for sure about love all he could do is smile and sit down. Among the things Dr. May thinks he knows about love is that love is a mystery, it causes us to be vulnerable, it means paying attention to someone. He also proposes that no one is incapable of love and no one loves himself or herself sufficiently.

Jonathan Kozol's wonderful children in *Amazing Grace* — survive because someone pays attention and loves them: a mother, a grandmother, a school teacher, a minister, anybody will do.

Cornell West says what the African American community needs most, particularly African American men, is self love.

There is a powerful passage by James Baldwin:

> "The joint, as Fats Waller would have said, was jumping. And during the last set the saxophone player took over with a terrific solo. He was a kid. But somewhere along the line he discovered he could say it with a saxophone. He stood there, wide-legged, humping the air, filling his narrow chest, shivering in the rags of his twenty-odd years, and screaming through the horn: 'Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you? Do you?' The same phrase unbearably and endlessly repeated with all the force the kid had ... The question was terrible and real. The boy was blowing with his lungs and guts out of his own short past, ... in gutters and gang fights ... behind marijuana or the needles. Somewhere in the past he had received a blow from which he would never recover. 'Do you love me?' The men on the stand stayed with him cool and at a distance, adding and questioning. But, each man knew that the boy was blowing for each one of them." [See Donald McCullough, p. 143]

Don McCullough, President of San Francisco Theological Seminary, says "the church exists to answer that young man's question." That is why we are here — and every church in Christendom, for that matter — to point to the love of God in Jesus Christ and say "yes, you are loved, loved more than you can imagine, loved by a God who will never let you go." [Donald McCullough *The Trivialization of God*, p. 143]

That's the real importance of this Church's mission: somehow in the process of being tutored and befriended by a volunteer, a youngster from Cabrini-Green experiences the gaze of a delighted other and knows he or she is loved. Somehow, sometimes, receiving food or clothing or encouragement at the Social Service Center a homeless man knows for a moment at least that he is a beloved child of God. Older adults, children, clients at the Counseling Center, mothers at Cabrini-Green, the services we provide are important in and of themselves. But what has the possibility of being life changing and life creating is the way service, mission, conveys the essential power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God's love, and the transforming potential to turn ordinary human beings into lovers.

The church, Donald McCullough says, is a "community of prodigal lovers." And I propose that if we need the experience of being loved to survive, we need to learn how to love in order truly to live. We run to Bethlehem, that is to say — as the poet put it — to learn to love.

Langdon Gilkey, who taught theology at the University of Chicago wrote:

> "To be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us, even more enhancing of the strengths of self, of the depths of its joys, than being loved. Thus it is the parent who is really blessed by the presence of the child, not the reverse, because of the incredible gift of another being whom we can hardly help but love." [*Message and Existence*]

It is why we learn, finally, that giving gifts is the way the Christmas event is best celebrated: that wonderful transformation that happens in the human heart — from the excitement and anticipation of receiving gifts to that deeper joy of giving gifts.

It is why we reach out to one another: sending cards and greetings and Christmas letters and little gifts and notes of affection because even if we don't have the theology quite figured out, we do know that love is the issue and that the real gift is to be enabled, inspired, prompted, to open our hearts and to love.

I clipped an entry from a devotional guide I use personally. It was last June, actually, but I knew it had to do with December 24. It's by a writer I do not know but with whom I agree. His name is Jack Kornfield,

> "The things that matter most in our lives are not fantastic or grand. They are the moments when we touch one another, when we are there in the most attentive and caring ways. This simple and profound intimacy is the love that we all long for."

And then Mr. Kornfield writes about something utterly true and ultimately important.

> "When people come to the end of their life and look back, the questions they most often ask are not usually, 'How much is in my bank account?' or 'How many books did I write?' or 'What did I build?'"

What we all ask is very simple. "Did I learn to love? Did I love enough? Did I live fully?" [See Jack Kornfield, *Daybook*, "A Path With Heart," June 5, 1995]

So, let us celebrate the feast. A child was born once in Bethlehem; a child about to be born again into the midst of our lives.

> "Let us run to learn
> How to love and to run
> Let us run to love.
> All, All, All, ...
> Run to Bethlehem ..."